

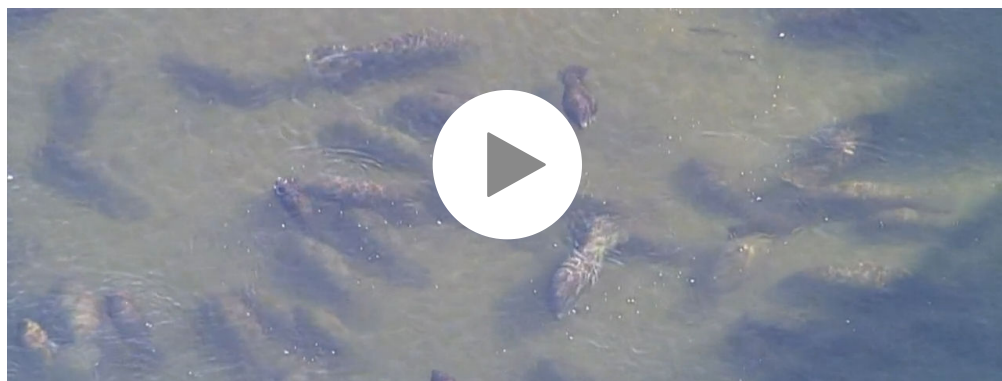
ANIMALS

# 'By far the worst year on record': Concern grows after 2021 records 1,101 manatees deaths in Florida

If the trend continues, environmental and conservation experts say Florida could lose its entire manatee population within years.



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SARASOTA, Fla. — The number of manatees in Florida dwindled at a concerning rate in parts of the state in 2021.

The Sunshine State saw a record number of 1,101 manatees die — almost doubling the rate from 2020 of 637 manatee deaths. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the sea cow's mortality rate reflects the highest loss since the turn of the century.

If this morbid trend continues, environmental and conservation experts say Florida could lose its entire manatee population within years.

"If you look at it in terms of Americans, it would be like 33 million Americans died. That's what's happening to a manatee population," said Dave Tomasko, Executive Director, Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

Tomasko said the number of manatees that died in 2021 accounts for 10-percent of the estimated 6,000 manatees in Florida.

Nearly 400 manatees starved to death on the eastern side of the state after harmful algae blooms destroyed the primary seagrass food supply.

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Wildlife experts say the quality of water of the Indian River Lagoon has deteriorated within the past decade, causing it to lose about 60%-percent of its seagrass meadows.

"It's by far the worst year on record and it's not sustainable. We can't have many more years like this and still have manatees," said Tomasko.

On the west side of the state, where 28 of the sea cows died in Manatee County and 19 died in Sarasota County, concerns surround watercraft strikes.

Although experts say the water quality is better and healthier in the Gulf of Mexico, the area's waterways are still under threat.

"You get a lot of runoff, obviously, during the rainy season so that's chemicals, nutrients that get into the bay," said Bobby Deskins, 10 Tampa Bay's Chief Meteorologist.

Deskins adds that other water-polluting factors help feed red tide, which most killed more than 2,000 tons of marine life last year.

"Plus, this summer we had Piney Point and that happened near the beginning of the rainy season, so you had a double whammy here on our coast that affected those algae blooms," Deskins said.

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Local and state governments are putting funds towards tackling the issue.

County and municipality leaders in Sarasota plan to spend around \$600 million over the next five years to address the water quality issues.

In his budget for 2022, Gov. Ron Desantis is also allocating funds to tackle water quality, blue-green algae and red tide problems among other climate change issues and impact mitigation strategies.

Tomasko said while the government handles "big ticket and big picture items," there are things that individuals can do to avoid compounding the issue.

"Clean up after your dog because dogs produce more bacteria than humans do and dogs produce nutrient loads. And don't over-fertilize your lawn especially if you use reclaimed water from a wastewater treatment plant. You may not need to fertilize at all," Tomasko said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife are now co-managing manatee response efforts through a joint incident management team.

If you see a dead, sick, or injured manatee you are asked to contact the FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 1-888-404-3922 or by dialing #FWC on a cellphone.

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**Conservation groups to sue EPA over Florida manatee deaths**



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